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486th ANTI-AIRCRAFT ARTILLERY
(AW) BATTALION (SP)

The image (above) comes from the history of the unit.

DAVID ZSIDO

About the Author

David Zsido was born in Proctor. He is a graduate of Mount Saint Joseph Academy and Norwich University. He helped found the Green Mountain Bull Dawg Chapter of the Antique Truck Club of America in 1992 and has served as president of the chapter since. He is an avid collector of truck history and memorabilia, including antique trucks and equipment. He has authored "Antique Trucks: A Different Kind of Horsepower", "The Early Years of Company C 368th Engineer Battalion, U.S. Army Reserve In Rutland, Vermont", "The Secrets of Glen Garage" and "Cinderella's Sweets" for the Society.

Introduction

A small group of young men from Proctor, West Rutland, and Rutland served together with distinction during the Second World War. Many of these soldiers were born of immigrant parents but were raised with English as the predominant language. However, many also spoke the language from the "Old Country" of their parents.

Most of these soldiers were less than ten years of age when the "Great Depression" occurred. During that lengthy period, they found themselves taking on part-time jobs to help support their families, while also attending school. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, they responded to one of the greatest challenges the world has ever faced, World War II. Without question, these members of the "Greatest Generation the World had ever known" lived up to that description!

More than sixty-five years have passed, since these young men entered active duty training in 1943. At this writing, only three local members of the 486th AAA Battalion of the famed 3rd Armored Division are still alive. They are Alex Firliet, Charles Vajda, and George Zsido. In retrospect their involvement with the Second World War should have been captured some thirty years earlier. Recently, upon pulling out the War Years album, in which Zsido's wife, Carley, had organized and so faithfully preserved many photographs and related documents, I finally decided that it may not be too late to offer tribute to these "Hometown Heroes".

The 486th “Anti-Anything” Battalion

By David Zsido

The Background of the 486th AAA Battalion

During the months that followed the deadly bombing of Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, the United States began amassing its military might. Countless units were activated, manned, trained, and equipped throughout 1942. Just over one year after Pearl Harbor, on 10 December 1942, the 486th Coast Artillery Anti-Aircraft Automatic Weapons Battalion was activated. Within a year, the unit would have its name changed to the 486th Armored Anti-Aircraft Battalion.

The 486th went to combat relying on two highly mobile and dependable pieces of equipment: the M-15 A1 and the M-16 half-tracks. American truck companies, such as White or Autocar manufactured the chassis. The M-15 A1 had two fifty-caliber machine guns and a 37mm cannon mounted on it, whereas, the M-16 had four fifty-caliber machine guns.

The gun crews were specifically trained to shoot down enemy aircraft. Nonetheless, combat demonstrated the versatility of these units as they effectively engaged ground troops, railroad locomotives, enemy emplacements, and even the mighty German tanks. Following nearly a year of intensive training at stateside military installations such as Camp Davis, North Carolina; Camp Polk, Louisiana; and Camp Hulen, Texas, the battalion was deployed to England for a final tune-up in preparation for the Normandy Invasion.

On 3 December 1943, the unit sailed on the Queen Mary. They arrived in England on 9 December 1943. Following seven months of further training, the 486th was attached to the First Army's 3rd Armored Division under the Command of Major General Maurice Rose on 25 June 1944. The famed 3rd Armored Division, nicknamed the “Spear-Head” Division, was involved in five major combat campaigns during the war to liberate Europe, and the 486th was a part of each of these campaigns. The 486th AAA Battalion was the only attached unit of the 3rd Armored Division to remain with it from the beginning in Normandy until the end of the war. In the bloody fighting in the hedgerows of Normandy, the

486th acquired a nickname of its own, the "Anti-Anything" Battalion. The 486th laid claim to a distinction that "in more than seventy direct air attacks on division areas protected by M-15 and M-16 half-track AA (Anti-Aircraft) mounts of the battalion, there was not a single case of serious damage caused by the attacking planes." Lieutenant Colonel Raymond Dunnington commanded the battalion.

Months From High School Graduation To Pearl Harbor

For the young men who graduated from Proctor High School during the period of 1938 through 1941, they did what most young men of that era did. They found work as quickly as possible. Most found jobs with the local Vermont Marble Company. Five of these young men from Proctor included John Gurdak, Frank Kynoski, Charles Vajda, George Zsido, and Stanley Zyza. Little did they



John Gurdak



Frank Kynoski



Charles Vajda



George Zsido



Stanley Zyza



Alex Firliet

DAVID ZSIDO

No photo of David Gilligan of West Rutland was available.

realize at that time that they would soon be joining with Alex Firliet and David Gilligan of West Rutland as a group of seven soldiers from the Rutland area who would become members of the 486th Armored Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion. There were only seventeen Vermonters who would serve with the more than five hundred soldiers of the 486th.

During that pre-war period, it was not uncommon for the young men of Proctor to gather at the white Marble Bridge in town particularly on Sunday afternoons. This might include Lenny Dahlin, Charles 'Chick' Shostak, and a few others, in addition to Gurdak, Zsido and Zyza. They would talk about sports and their jobs. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, their discussion often turned to their possible involvement in the war.



DAVID ZSIDO

The young men of Proctor regularly gathered on the marble bridge on weekends.

On many such afternoons, they would walk down the hill into the center of the village and play basketball at the Sutherland Club.

George Zsido became a machinist assistant for the Vermont Marble Company at its machine shop in Proctor. In 1941 he was dating his future wife, Carley Lester. On many summer weekends, they would park George's black 1936 Chevy four door sedan at the top of Cain Street in town, and then hike the steep incline to the top of High Ledge on the west side of the village. From there they would enjoy perhaps the most spectacular scenic vista of the Otter Creek Valley. Henry Barch, an independent sort of character, who lived in a small cottage at the top of the ledge, may have been the person who placed a flagpole, which could be seen for miles, on the lip of the ledge. Life was still calm but full of uncertainty.

George was driving his Chevy on Wales Street in Rutland shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. He and Carley stopped and read the news headline of the special edition posted in the window of the Rutland Herald. The possibility of the United States being involved in a war was now a harsh reality. Zsido said that the Sunday meetings on the Marble Bridge now became more focused upon the early stages of the Second World War. Most all the young men agreed that each would eventually play a role in it. Nonetheless, George and Carley continued on with their wedding plans. Carley prepared to convert to Catholicism in advance of their wedding date on 1 August, when Father Marcoux of St Dominic Catholic Church in Proctor would join them in matrimony.

Enlistment and Training

During the first few days of January 1943, most of the seven men from the Rutland area, who would serve in the 486th, received Draft Board notices to report. As Zsido recalled, he had to report for a pre-selection medical examination with Dr. Quigley in Rutland whose office was at the corner of State and Grove Streets. About the only thing that Zsido recalled about the examination was the reflex test. The physician had him cross his legs, so that he could tap his knees to gauge Zsido's reflexes. He passed the simple test, and Quigley said, "you're good to gowould you like a six month deferral?" Zsido noted that he didn't need the deferral, as he was

“ready to serve”.

A few days later, he and the six others from the Rutland area met a much larger group of enlistees at the Rutland Armory on West Street. The large group was hastily organized into a marching body, and stepped off down West Street hill to Mac's Diner for a quick breakfast. They then boarded a bus for a trip to Fort Devens, Massachusetts.

The stay at Fort Devens was relatively short. Additional paperwork was completed. There were further medical examinations and, of course, vaccinations were administered. It was here that the seven learned that they would continue on to Camp Davis, North Carolina. By 15 January 1943 some five hundred men were scheduled to depart from Fort Devens to Camp Davis. They made the journey by train.

At Camp Davis these enlistees underwent twelve weeks of basic training. It was a rigorous process of transforming these men from civilian life to military life. There wasn't much time for rest, and there always seemed to be a considerable amount of full field pack marching. Near the conclusion of this training the soldiers were given a three-day furlough. Zsido decided to try and make it back to Vermont to see his wife. He boarded a train in Wilmington, North Carolina. The locomotive had only chugged a short distance down the tracks, when it encountered a broken rail. Zsido remembers thinking that he would never make his Vermont connection at Grand Central Station. Fortunately the repairs were quickly completed, and he made it home for a very brief stay with his wife.

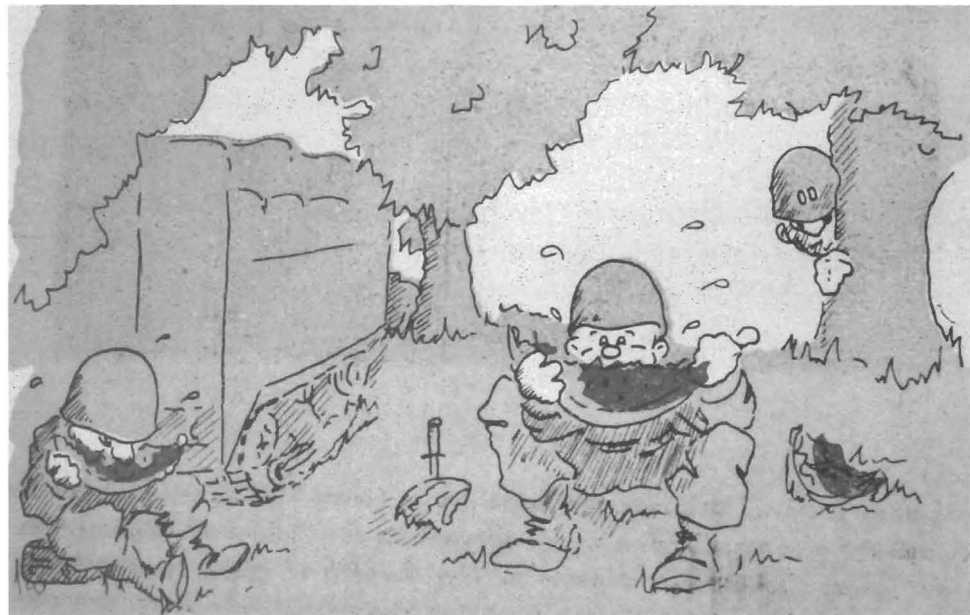
Shortly after returning to Camp Davis, he and the other Rutland area soldiers received their orders to proceed to Camp Polk, Louisiana. At this military installation they underwent further medical evaluations and had more vaccinations administered. It was here that they first became aware of the fact that they had been selected to become a part of a “special type of outfit”. Moreover the official designation of the unit was changed from the 486th Seacoast Artillery Battalion to the 486th Armored Anti-Aircraft Battalion. It was here that the group began their specialized training with the U.S. Army half-track. On one unofficial training mission, Zsido's half-track crew raided a nearby farmer who was

growing watermelons. The crew stacked a sizeable quantity of the large ripe melons in their half-track, as the farmer shouted that if they ever returned he'd shoot them.



DAVID ZSIDO

George Zsido standing in front of the Battery C half-tracks.



DAVID ZSIDO

Unit history cartoon illustrating the "watermelon raid".

Their next stop in the formalized training was Camp Hulen, Texas. The soldiers literally drove their half-tracks from Camp Polk to Camp Hulen. Here the battalion members would further refine their marksmanship skills by shooting at targets being pulled by small aircraft, usually Piper Cubs. They also found much better barracks for living quarters. A large portion of the enlisted soldiers of the battalion had home roots in the Northeast, particularly the New England States. Zsido noted that, by contrast, a sizeable portion of the officer ranks were comprised of individuals from the South. Training at this location was definitely intensive and completely demanding of nearly all of the soldiers' time. It would be at this location that the soldiers would undergo their final in-depth training before heading overseas. It was also here that Zsido was promoted to the rank of sergeant. Although training was nearly constant, there was some time for a little friendly flag football rivalry between the batteries. One newspaper clipping reported on such a rivalry between Battery "A" and Battery "B", Zsido's Battery. It describes a twenty-yard flip from SSGT John Coury to Zsido, who took off for another twenty yards to the end zone for the score. Zsido had previously played high school football for Proctor High School.

Heading Overseas

On 12 November 1943 the battalion received its orders to proceed to Camp Shanks near New York City. The unit prepared for the move over the next several days. By 18 November, all members of the unit had boarded a train; made the lengthy trip through the heart of the country; and arrived at Camp Shanks. The train ride offered some the opportunity for personal reflection, and for others an opportunity for bolstering their comradery, for as Zsido noted, "there were numerous card games taking place". They would only be at Camp Shanks for a period of less than two weeks. During that time, the most any soldier could anticipate in terms of a military leave was a three-hour furlough. There were further full field pack marches in mountainous areas, and the soldiers began to speculate that perhaps they would be headed for the Alps.

On 3 December 1943 the soldiers of the 486th boarded the Queen Mary in New York Harbor. Carley Zsido had visited with the wife of another soldier in the unit from Connecticut just prior to the ship's departure. From there the two wives journeyed together to New York City to see the ship set sail. Although they never had a face to face goodbye with their husbands, they did at least wave goodbye as the ship steamed out of port.

Zsido noted that the formerly elegant Queen Mary had been stripped of its usual accommodations. Bunk beds were packed into the rooms. Moreover the sheer size of the ship made it difficult to locate a buddy, who may have been separated in the boarding process. Although not in the same unit, he did bump into Ernie Sule of Proctor on the fifth level. The Queen Mary sailed without a naval escort. Submarine protection was not feasible as the subs could not keep up with the Queen. Zsido spent some hours during the crossing relieving English soldiers, who were manning the ship's guns. On 9 December 1943, the large vessel docked at Greenock, Scotland. The tired troops quickly debarked with their gear, and climbed aboard a train for the final leg of their trip to Wiltshire in the north of London. The battalion was split with two units being housed at Hayes Camp and the other two, including "B" Battery, at Clouds Camp in East Knoyle.

Training For the Invasion

While in England during the months that preceded the Normandy Invasion, combat training and physical readiness training was endless for the members of the 486th. Zsido was selected as the sole Vermont representative for a ten day Swimmando (Commando Swimming Exercise), which took place in London. He remembered that he was selected based on statements he had made about his swimming abilities, which he had developed at the Proctor Swimming Pool. He traveled to London from Clouds Camp by train. Essentially the training was to foster a soldier's ability to survive if forced to jump into the waters of the English Channel during the invasion. During these exercises, soldiers equipped with their full combat pack, rifle, and steel The

helmet, jumped from a twenty-foot tower into a fresh water pool. With their rifles in their right hands and their steel helmets in their left hands, they obviously attempted to stay afloat and swim the length of the pool. He noted that actually the trapped air in the field pack did afford some assistance with buoyancy. In addition, they had to swim underwater a distance of seventy-five yards with their full combat gear. The swimmers also had to plunge into and swim through a pool of burning oil on the surface of the water. The training staff was so impressed with Zsido's swimming skills that they tried to entice him to leave the 486th and become an instructor. He turned down their request, and chose to return to the 486th. Prior to leaving London and returning to his unit, he did have a brief opportunity to have a souvenir photograph taken of himself, that he sent back to his wife on the home front.

In 1944 the German Army waged a limited assault on London once again. This time they used their newly developed V-1 flying bombs or V-2 rockets. Although the soldiers of the 486th periodically heard explosions coming from the London area, they were never a target of these devices. On one of their numerous full field pack marches, noted World War II author Ernie Pyle captured a line of marching soldiers from Battery "B" of the 486th with his camera. The photograph was used on the slipcover of Pyle's first novel "Ernie Pyle in England". Although none of the Proctor boys were in the photograph, many of the ones pictured were members of Battery "B", whom Zsido knew and recognized, especially one of his buddies, Howard Gumbar.

The Normandy Invasion Begins - D-Day

On 6 June 1944, the allied forces launched the tremendous drive which would push Germany back to its homeland. Some eleven months later, on 8 May 1945, "VE Day" would be declared as the Nazis had been defeated and surrendered. Nearly 73,000 American troops were part of the initial fighting forces to storm the French coast. The toll in terms of casualties was high. Almost 2,500 Americans were killed in action on that day. The members of the 486th had to wait long days before the allied troops had secured

enough of a front to allow the 3rd Armored Division, to which it was attached, the ability to cross the English Channel. As Zsido recalls, he and his fellow soldiers didn't say too much during those days. If anything, they would simply and cautiously tell one another, "it won't be long now...", or "it's just a matter of time...". They spent time constantly going over their equipment. They worked on the half-tracks, applying protective coatings of grease and cosmoline to prevent rusting from likely salt water exposure. They hoped that their tracks would not have to be dropped from the landing crafts in extremely deep water. They thought about loved ones and families at home.

When the 3rd Armored Division received word to cross the English Channel, the 486th Armored Anti-Aircraft battalion was right on its heels. The order came on 21 June 1944. The soldiers immediately boarded their assigned landing craft. On the next day they set sail across the English Channel to France. Up until that point, about the only news, which the Rutland area young soldiers heard about the fighting was, "the Germans are putting up a good battle." The crossing of the Channel in LST and LCT type landing craft was under calm and quiet conditions. As SGT Zsido noted, "none of the members of my battery got sea sick....everyone was focused on getting safely to the beach." They knew that the allied forces had pushed the Germans back about five miles from the beachfront. This would give the heavy tank units of the 3rd Armored Division and the mechanized half-tracks of the 486th the time and space to get reorganized after their landing. Zsido remembers that the shoreline of Omaha Beach was littered with disabled landing craft and small boats that had been sunk or damaged on June 6. The landing craft carrying the 486th had to be carefully piloted through narrow channels between these other damaged vessels. The beachfront of Omaha was clear, and the half-tracks motored their way to their assigned assembly points; clearing the way so that others could follow behind them. Meanwhile, back in Vermont, Zsido's wife, Carley, had sent Father Marcoux, the Catholic priest from Saint Dominic Catholic Church in Proctor, some news about Zsido's participation in the war. Father Marcoux had mailed Mrs. Zsido a short note of encouragement and hope, which read in part: "I was proud to hear

about George. Just now he may need our prayers more than ever before. Be confident, trust in God, and keep in His friendship. You may be assured of my continued prayers.”

Enemy Encounters



DAVID ZSIDO

George Zsido stands beside his half-track that shows a series of “kill” insignia on the side.



Alex Firliet stands at the rear of his half-track. The photo illustrates the firepower of the vehicle.

specialized half-track vehicles, which the members of the 486th had been so rigorously trained on, were of two distinct types; the M-15 and the M-16. There were eight M-15 A1s and eight M-16s in each battery of the battalion. An armored battery was a complement similar to the military designation of "Company". The young soldiers from the Rutland area were assigned to various batteries within the 486th. Frank Kynoski was assigned to the Headquarters Section. Alex Firliet, John Gurdak, and George Zsido were all in "B" Battery. David Gilligan and Stanley 'Sis' Zyza were members of "C" Battery. Charles Vajda was the sole Rutland area soldier in "D" Battery. The available firepower from these vehicles was absolutely amazing for the era. Each M-15 half-track was equipped with a .37 mm cannon and two fifty-caliber machine guns. On the other hand, each M-16 had four turret mounted fifty-caliber machine guns, which were sighted to converge at about one thousand yards with simultaneous firing. There was generally another single fifty-caliber machine gun mounted over the cab of the vehicle. However, these lightly armored vehicles were never designed to go head to head with the Nazi Panzer tanks. They certainly couldn't stand up to the powerful Nazi 88 mm rounds. If forced into a firefight with the tanks, the most they could hope to do was to cripple the tanks by hitting them in the bogie wheels to knock off a track, or hit the engine compartment.

As the assets of the 486th were assigned to various sections of the 3rd Armored Division, often these seven soldiers went for extended periods of time without seeing one another.

As they moved forward into France on the day following their landing, fighting started nearly immediately. They passed numerous small American tanks, which had been knocked out in fighting only a few days earlier. They encountered buzzing enemy aircraft, in fact, one of the first targets of Zsido's half-track was a German Messerschmitt, which his crew opened fire on and knocked down. His gunnery crew shot down another four or five German aircraft that first day. From there the almost endless fighting from hedgerow to hedgerow began. As Zsido recalled, "It was almost endless ... We were constantly on the move pushing forward...." Throughout the summer and fall they rolled forward; through Northern France, through Belgium, and ultimately onto German soil.

In separate early action with “D” Battery soon after their landing in France, Charles Vajda remembered that his section was asked to capture a vital Nazi communication center in St Lo, France. As he was making his way back to his half-track during an enemy mortar assault, a hedgerow round exploded as it fell through the trees. He received a serious leg wound from the shrapnel and was transported to a field hospital. Vajda noted that as he lay on the stretcher, waiting for the ambulance, he looked at the stretcher next to him, perhaps only eight inches away. There a young wounded German soldier rested, also waiting to be transported for further medical treatment. It took Vajda several weeks to recover from his wounds, for which he received the Army’s Purple Heart.

Continuing On To Germany

Perhaps the deadliest firefight that Battery “B” was involved with happened near the town of Mons, in Belgium. The half-tracks of the 486th had been pushing hard for days. They finally got to a point in Belgium where they needed to take some down time for rest and vehicle maintenance. The area appeared to be secure, so the half-track commanders dispersed their vehicles, and set up



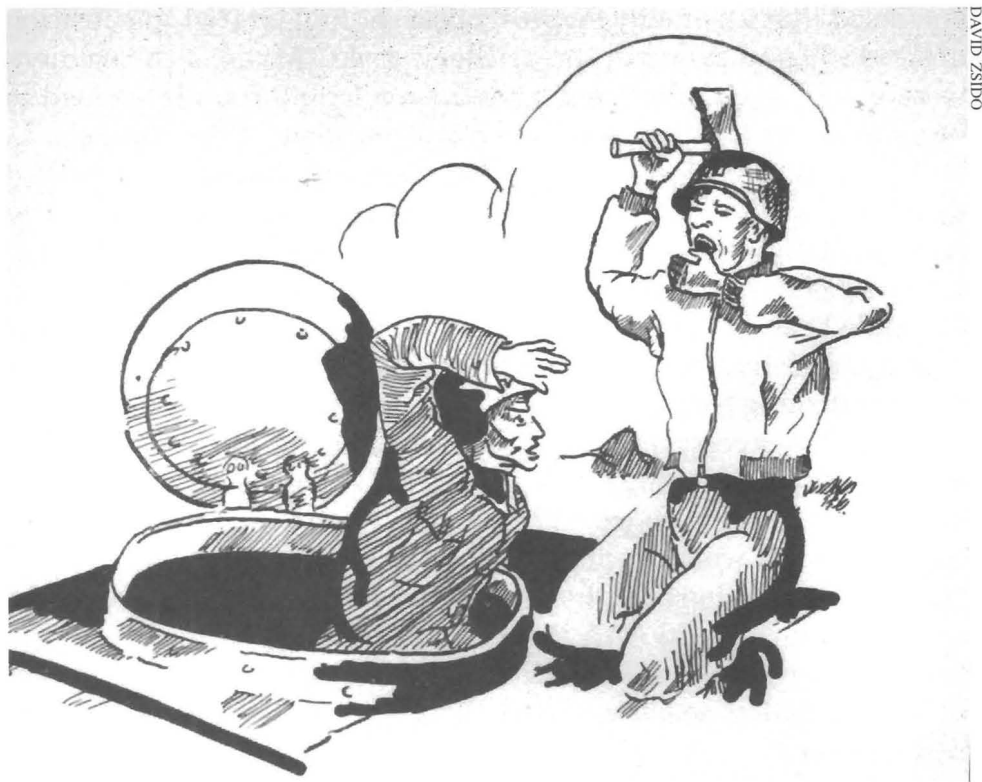
DAVID ZSIDO

George Zsido in Belgium with camouflaged half-track.

defensive positions. Little did they realize that they had set up in the middle of the main escape route of the German Army. They had no sooner begun their break from action when a barrage of enemy artillery and mortar rounds began dropping on them. Zsido surmised that an enemy forward observer had plotted the position of the 486th and called in the artillery strike. Many of the soldiers were unprepared. Shrapnel from the exploding rounds seemed to be ricocheting everywhere. One Staff Sergeant, SSG Kenneth L. Yates, the motor sergeant of the Maintenance Section, had walked to Zsido's location just before the rounds dropped from the sky. The people of Belgium had been so happy to see the American GI's that they had given some of the soldiers bottles of cognac and calvados, an apple brandy. Yates had gone to Zsido's location for a bottle of brandy, and had left his helmet back at the motor pool. Sadly, when returning to the motor pool, he was caught in the midst of the barrage. Yates received a mortal shrapnel wound to his head. Two others suffered blinding eye wounds from shrapnel. Zsido, himself, was struck in the face with shrapnel from a mortar blast. He was treated for his wounds, and was able to continue on. He received the Army's Purple Heart for the wound suffered in this action. As described in the "486 AAA Bn – Combat History", this action was so intense that, "the Division's artillery battalions were firing through 360 degrees, there were Germans to the right, to the left, just all over."

The commander of Battery "B" was Captain Philip Shaw. Zsido remembered him as "a man, who wasn't afraid of anything." Zsido often thought that Captain Shaw was trying to impress his uncle, who was a General in the First Army. In Northern France one day, when the battery had taken a break in the action, Shaw came up to Zsido and said, "let's go searching the hedgerows and find a German tank." Zsido then politely asked the captain if he was crazy, and said, "no I'd like to live to see tomorrow." The Captain drafted two other "volunteers", including Private John Zimla, and headed out. That night Shaw did discover a Mark V tank. Apparently as he tried to place a demolition charge under the tank, it fired up and began moving forward. The three soldiers crawled up onto the back of the tank and dropped an incendiary grenade through an open hatch to smoke out the Nazis. It worked, the tank stopped, and as the Nazis exited the smoke filled tank, the Americans engaged them.

In the resulting fight, one of the German soldiers was killed with a blow from a hatchet. Zsido believes that it was Private John Zimla, who delivered the fatal blow with what was described as the “traditional American weapon”.



DAVID ZSIDO

Unit artist created this cartoon of John Zimla with hatchet.

Alex Firliet also recalled being a part of reconnaissance patrols looking for German troop activity. In looking back at these patrols, he mentioned, “I was probably extremely lucky that I was never shot.”

On German Soil

The fast moving, hard fighting soldiers of the 3rd Armored Division and the 486th Armored Anti-Aircraft Battalion pushed on for weeks on end, driving the Nazi Army back to its homeland. Moreover, they were the first United States soldiers to set foot on German soil. Cpl Stanley ‘Sis’ Zyza’s half-track crew had one further distinction. His crew was the first crew to knock down a

German aircraft while engaging the enemy plane on German soil. This action took place southeast of Brand, Germany on 18 September 1944. As the four fifty calibers blazed away on Zyza's half-track, the German FW-190 aircraft fell from the sky in pieces. The First Army recognized Cpl Zyza and his crew for their action, which included all allied forces in Europe. Zsido and many of his fellow soldiers often referred to Zyza as the "Mad Russian".



DAVID ZSIDO

"Sis" Zyza

As the winter months began to settle in, the men of the 486th started experiencing the effects of not having proper winter climate equipment. It was extremely difficult to keep warm. Supplies were requested but never seemed to arrive. Finally they were issued heavy jackets and paratrooper style jump boots to replace their shoes and leggings (ankle spats). The 486th was in the Stolberg area of Germany as the winter set in. "B" battery was taking up a defensive posture and placing outposts at various points along the perimeter. 1st LT George W. Wilson had been given an order to set up these outposts. He along with Sgt George Rinkevitch and Sgt Jerome Cutone set out to carry out the order. As they approached Zsido, he warned the Lieutenant that he'd better not go any further. He pointed out a nearby tank mine and cautioned the young Lieutenant that there was an obvious mine field in the sector he was planning to enter. Wilson replied that, "orders are orders". I have to establish the outpost..." Zsido watched helplessly.

The three soldiers proceeded more than one hundred feet up the slight hill toward the designated outpost location. Suddenly there was a tremendous blast. Zsido watched as one of Wilson's legs, which had been completely severed, was hurled into the air. Immediately, Zsido sent a messenger back to headquarters to get the engineer mine disposal units to respond to the scene to clear the mines. Rather than waiting for them to return, Zsido carefully

set out through the minefield; marking each footstep that he made, until he was about ten feet away from the severely wounded soldiers. At that point he had exhausted his supply of marking material. He cautiously approached the Lieutenant first. With his voice filled with pain, Wilson said, "forget me, get my men out of here".... He was gravely wounded, and would die within twenty-four hours. Zsido always remembered Wilson as one of the most dedicated officers in the unit; voicing that "he was one hell of a nice guy". Sgt Cutone had both ankles broken and was suffering from other wounds. Sgt Rinkevitch had at least one broken leg and other wounds. Zsido went to Cutone, loaded him onto his shoulders, and carefully made his way back out of the minefield. He and Cutone, who was from Essex, Connecticut, remained life-long friends following the war. Their families remained in contact with one another on a regular basis, right to the time of this writing. Zsido always questioned the order that was given to Wilson, stating that the Captain, who gave it, was a "worthless drunk". Zsido was cited for his act of heroism, and was awarded the Army Bronze Star.

The Battle of the Bulge

On 17 December the 486th was still in the Stolberg, Germany area. In one of the last desperate attempts to regain a foothold, the German Army punched through the First Army lines near Monschau. The 3rd Armored Division and the 486th would soon be on the roll headed to shore up the breach. Sections of "B" Battery, including Zsido's half-track, were stationed in the defense of key concrete bridges, many days not knowing from which direction the enemy might be coming. Toward the end of the battle Zsido and his gunnery crew witnessed an incredible sight. A low flying German jet aircraft flew through their sector. The jet seemed to be in trouble with its engine sputtering. The aircraft was low enough so that they could observe the pilot, who helplessly just gave them a wave. The pilot then banked around and headed back into Germany. It was the first German jet that they had ever seen. Moreover, they were perhaps some of the few American soldiers, who ever saw a German jet in flight during the war. The gunnery crew from Battery "B" never fired a round. Charles Vajda pointed

out that had not the Germans been so pressed by the American forces, they might have had more time to perfect the Messerschmitt, ME262, the first military jet fighter. He reflected that the Germans “just didn’t have enough time to convert from propeller aircraft to jet aircraft.”

During these months of heavy fighting and constant movement; it was difficult for the men to send any letters back home. Zsido noted that he was only able to get a letter in the mail perhaps “every couple of weeks”. Receiving mail from home was always special, but it was scarce, as the mail never seemed to catch up with the constantly moving half-tracks. Often letters received back on the home front were communications published by the Army and not from the individual soldier. These military letters provided loved ones with general information about their soldiers, perhaps promotion news or even news about wounds they may have suffered.

The Final Push to the Elbe River

During the spring months of 1945 the American forces continued their push deep into Germany, and the 486th kept up with the fast pace of the 3rd Armored Division. As Zsido remembered, somewhere near Aachen the 486th captured a German airfield. The Nazis had retreated from the location quickly leaving behind a vast cache of weapons still in cosmoline, ammunition, and a vast store of new uniforms, including many new pilots’ uniforms. Overtaking another facility, which housed the finance section of the German Army in that location, they discovered an enormous cash payroll, consisting of the old German marks. They were advised that these old marks were worthless, and most of the vast stack of currency was burned. Nonetheless, for reasons unknown to Zsido, he heard that CPL Zyza was buying the old marks. Zsido noted, “he paid at a rate of 50 new marks for 100 old marks.” He was never sure what ‘Sis’ was doing with the old marks.

Postwar Germany

With the official surrender of the Nazis in May of 1945, the 486th pulled back from the extent of its furthest drive into the heart of Germany. When they stopped, the unit members were only a short

distance from Berlin. They would spend the next few months near Wiesbaden, where they would devote considerable time to the maintenance of their half-tracks and other tactical equipment.



DAVID ZSIDO

Post-war station of the 486th Battalion in Germany.

They would undergo training for their next possible area of deployment, the Pacific Theater. Nonetheless, there was still a little time for spirited rivalry within the 3rd Armored Division. The 486th's softball team, of which Zsido and Zyza were players, finished in second place in the 3rd Armored Division League. Zsido was even called to the mound to provide the pitching on a few occasions. The post-war period also provided them the opportunity to view close-hand some of the American aircraft, which had been supporting them on their combat missions. Zsido got up close to a B-25 Bomber, dubbed the "Billy Mitchell", and a P-38 Lockheed "Lightning" named the "Black Widow". On 26 July 1945, the 486th "Anti-Anything" Battalion was honored by a visit from the Commander In Chief, President Harry S. Truman. The President conducted a review of the combat veterans. Zsido recalled that he

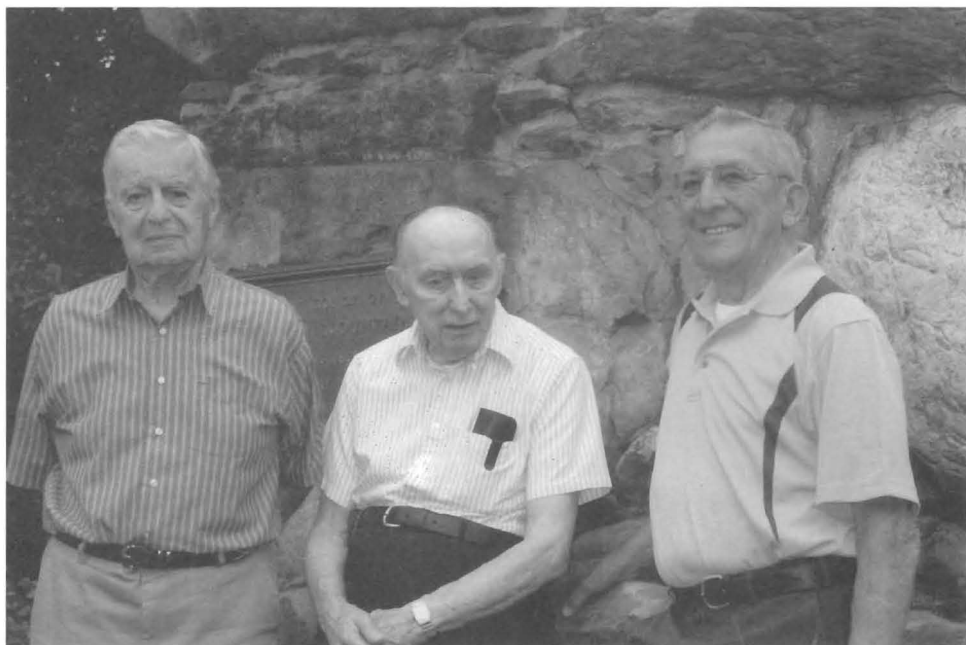
had been able to get close enough to President Truman to shake his hand. The 486th continued on with its training exercises for deployment to the Pacific. However, roughly three weeks after the President's visit, the Japanese surrendered on 15 August 1945. Zsido was offered a commission if he would stay on and accept an assignment in the post-war Pacific. He declined the offer and elected to return to Vermont. The return voyage for Zsido began on 9 October 1945, when he boarded the USS Admiral W.L. Capps. He arrived in New York Harbor on 18 October 1945 on his twenty-fifth birthday. Ultimately he was discharged from active duty on 25 October 1945 at Fort Dix, New Jersey.

Unit Overview

There were twenty-five members of the 486th Armored Anti-Aircraft Battalion who were killed in action during the war. Fortunately, all the Vermonters returned home safely. One of the most unfortunate casualties was the loss of the 3rd Armored Division Commander, Major General Maurice Rose. He was an extremely respected leader. Often the front line troops would look and find him right there with them. Sometimes the soldiers would caution the General about being so far forward. On 31 March 1945, after so effectively leading the 3rd Armored Division through so many campaigns, General Rose was killed by a young Nazi tank commander. It was recorded that the General was somewhat surprised by the encounter, and went to pull his handgun from its holster to surrender, when the German tank commander fatally shot him. Major General Rose was the highest ranking American officer killed in action during World War II. Zsido reflected that General Rose was well respected by the men of the 486th for his leadership style of being right there with his men.

Individual medals presented to the soldiers of the 486th included the following: six Silver Stars for Gallantry in Action; seventy-nine Bronze Stars for Heroic Achievement; fourteen Bronze Stars for Meritorious Service; and one hundred forty-two Purple Hearts for Wounds in Action. Gilligan, Vajda, and Zsido all received a Purple Heart. Zsido received a Bronze Star. The "Anti-Anything Battalion" also received the Award of Belgian Fourragere by decree of the extremely grateful country of Belgium on 25 November 1945. Years later the French Government also

recognized many of the veterans in the northeast section of the United States for their efforts with the liberation of France during the Second World War. Zsido was one of the few Rutland Area veterans, who received a "Special Diploma" from the French Consulate at ceremonies conducted at Norwich University on 22 September 2000. It was the French Government's way of conveying an important message to these surviving veterans of the allied invasion, which began on 6 June 1944, that "France had not forgotten them...nor would they ever be forgotten...." Let's pray that America doesn't forget them either!



(Left to right): Charles Vajda, Alex Firliet and George Zsido.

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